

## Sancta Civitas (The Holy City)

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

The biblical oratorio was one of the mainstays of British music throughout the Victorian period, but had run out of steam by the time of Parry's *Job* in 1892. Elgar breathed new life into the oratorio form with *The Dream of Gerontius*, but this is a very different beast from the narrative works of the previous century. Although *Sancta Civitas* is a return to an earlier form in that it is based on biblical texts, its brevity is in marked contrast to their length and it is not a straightforward narrative. The text is from the Book of Revelation and its subject is the afterlife, shown in a vision of the Holy City where the souls of the faithful will live after death.

In fact, Vaughan Williams was by no means a convinced believer; he was described by Sir Steuart Wilson, tenor and friend of the composer since university days, as a "Christian agnostic." He had a deeply religious sensibility, but not a religious conviction. On the flyleaf of the score of *Sancta Civitas*, Vaughan Williams puts a quotation from Plato's *Phaedo*, the final Socratic dialogue in which Socrates discusses immortality with his friends in the hours before his enforced suicide. What Socrates says is far removed from a conventional Christian approach: "No sensible man will insist that things are exactly as I have envisaged them, but I think he will accept that something like it must be true. The soul, at any event, appears to be immortal and, as risk is a fine thing, it is worthwhile to stake all on this belief." Vaughan Williams did not believe in the absolute truth of John the Divine's revelation, but, as someone who less than ten years before had served in the first world war, he seems to be saying that the belief in a transcendent, perfected existence after death is a prerequisite for a meaningful life in this world. Like Socrates, Vaughan Williams considers that such a belief is essential, however unprovable; he reaches out to a religious, though not specifically Christian, understanding of the world.

Vaughan Williams (who said that this was his favourite among all his choral works) began *Sancta Civitas* in 1923, just five years after the end of the war in which he had fought, and where he witnessed so much barbarity and lost so many friends. The post-war reaction of many was to embrace pure, live-for-today hedonism and to scorn the piety of the pre-war world, and tonight's work seems like a plea for a deeper, more spiritual response. It is scored for a large orchestra and three separate choirs and, being a response to the conflict of the war, it seems entirely appropriate that its first performance should have taken place during the social conflict of the General Strike in 1926. It is significant that ten years later, when the rise of Nazism seemed clearly to be making for a dreadful repetition of the nightmare of 1914-18, Vaughan Williams composed an overt plea for peace, *Dona nobis pacem*, and that his music was banned by the Nazis in 1939.

*Sancta Civitas* falls into three continuous sections: the first section proclaims the vision of Heaven as envisaged in Revelation xix; the second deals with the destruction of Babylon, symbol of all that is worldly, as found in Revelation xviii; the third section is the City of God, as described in Revelation xxi. The work begins with a slow, mystical orchestral introduction which sets the visionary feel for the work, and the baritone soloist enters confirming that what we are to hear is a vision, "I was in the spirit and I heard a great voice saying Alleluia," the "Alleluias" being then taken up by the choirs. After this introduction, the main part of the first section begins with a distant trumpet call. This was a device Vaughan Williams had used in his *Pastoral Symphony* where it evokes the distant, idyllic landscape of England while the composer was in the trenches of the First World War. Here, similarly, it introduces a vision of Heaven, with the heavenly hosts praising God and the bride of the Lamb (the Church) described in all her purity. We also hear how the Lamb goes out to do battle with "the Kings of the earth and their armies" and of the fall of Babylon. This

war-like section might seem like an obvious place to provide drama and contrast, but, while still doing so, Vaughan Williams does not dwell on this aspect; the memories of the trenches were too fresh for the glorification of any conflict, however justified.

The second section is the very opposite of Walton's brash, triumphal setting of the same event in *Belshazzar's Feast*. Unexpectedly, the fall of Babylon is set as a lament for the glory that is lost: the fine linen, purple and scarlet and precious stones, "for in one hour art thou made desolate." Again, for Vaughan Williams the destruction brought about by war is not something in which to rejoice; the human cost is to the fore: "the voice of the harpers shall be heard no more at all in thee and the voice of the bridegroom and of the bride shall be heard no more." We see it from the perspective of the vanquished, not the victor.

The third section is ushered in by an exquisite violin solo, and in a hushed *parlando* the choirs tell of how they saw "a new heav'n and a new earth." As with the section about Babylon, Vaughan Williams eschews the obvious; the section is not one of simple rejoicing. The great majority of this third section is slow and quiet, many sections being marked *ppp*. Only when God is praised does the music increase in tempo and volume; "Lord God almighty, heaven and earth are full of thy glory." But true to what has gone before, at the end of the work the music becomes hushed, the distant trumpet that had been heard at the beginning of the piece returns, and an entirely new element is introduced. A solo tenor sings "Behold I come quickly, I am the bright and the morning star. Surely I come quickly", the choir whisper "Amen, even so come, Lord" and the music winds to a conclusion of unsettling ambiguity. The final repeated chords, which are directed to diminuendo to *niente* (nothing), are an unresolved discord; the work ends in hope and uncertainty rather than simple belief.

### **The Armed Man (A Mass for Peace)**

**Karl Jenkins (born 1944)**

- 1 *L'homme armé*
- 2 *The Call to Prayers*
- 3 *Kyrie eleison*
- 4 *Save me from bloody men*
- 5 *Sanctus*
- 6 *Hymn before action*
- 7 *Charge*
- 8 *Angry flames*
- 9 *Torches*
- 10 *Agnus Dei*
- 11 *Now the guns have stopped*
- 12 *Benedictus*
- 13 *Better is peace*

Karl Jenkins was born in the village of Penclawdd on the Gower peninsula in South Wales. His father was a schoolteacher, organist and choirmaster who provided Karl with a musical education from an early age, leading to his studying music at Cardiff University and then at the Royal Academy of Music in London. His instrument was the oboe, but he took up the saxophone and made his first mark in the musical world as a jazz musician, gaining valuable experience as a composer, arranger, jazz performer, and band leader. He then joined the Canterbury progressive rock band Soft Machine, who in 1970 were the first pop group to play at the Proms (though this was before Jenkins joined them in 1972). As well as his involvement with Soft Machine, Jenkins was writing music for TV commercials, including adverts for Levi,

De Beers and for the Renault Clio, winning two industry awards. His breakthrough into the classical field was in 1995 with *Adiemus*, which was performed all over the world. The first three albums of the *Adiemus* series achieved huge popularity, topping both classical and popular music charts and winning 15 gold and platinum awards. As a result, famous classical singers such as Kiri Te Kanawa and Bryn Terfel recorded his music. The popularity of tonight's work is shown by the fact that it has appeared in the top 20 in Classic FM's Hall of Fame (in which listeners vote for their favourite piece of classical music) every year since 2005.

*The Armed Man: A Mass for Peace* was commissioned by the Royal Armouries to celebrate the new millennium and first performed in 2000. The texts were chosen jointly by the composer and the Master of the Royal Armouries, Guy Wilson, to be used, rather as in Britten's *War Requiem*, within the context of movements from the Latin mass. The title is taken from a 15<sup>th</sup> century French song which had huge international popularity in the late medieval period and was used as the basis of at least 40 "parody masses" from about 1450 until the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century by composers such as Josquin des Prez (twice), Palestrina, de la Rue, Morales and Carissimi. A "parody mass" simply means a work which uses a secular melody as its "cantus firmus", the tune on which the work is based; there is no implication of "parody" in the usual modern sense of a humorous mockery. The text of the song is perhaps a reference to the Archangel Michael, but could simply be a marching song inspired by the siege of Constantinople in 1453, when the capital of Byzantium fell to the Ottoman Turks.

L'homme armé doibt on doubter.	The armed man should be feared.
On a fait partout crier	Everywhere it has been proclaimed
Que chascun se viegne armer	That each man shall arm himself
D'un haubregon de fer.	With a coat of iron mail.
L'homme armé doibt on doubter.	The armed man should be feared.

Jenkins has described how world events had an impact on the composing process: "As I started composing *The Armed Man*, the tragedy of Kosovo unfolded. I was reminded daily of the horror of such conflict, and so I dedicate the work to the victims of Kosovo." Guy Wilson has said that Jenkins "responded to the commission by composing the most marvellous, varied, accessible, appropriate and singable music that embraces the whole world and the full range of emotions that the subjects of war and peace evoke." The wish for universality felt by both Wilson and Jenkins is demonstrated by the use of texts which range from the first millennium BC to modern times and encompass Hindu, Islamic and Christian cultures. Musically, as well as the use of the medieval song, Jenkins explicitly composed music in imitation or reminiscent of earlier styles elsewhere in the work. Although the work is not a straightforward narrative, there is a distinct narrative progression through the movements: an army approaches, prayers for deliverance and mercy are made but preparations for war are inevitable, battle is engaged resulting in destruction and acts of barbarism, but after a plea for mercy the fighting stops and is followed by a blessing and hope for the future.

The work begins with an arrangement of the "L'homme armé" song imitating an approaching army. It begins with a marching drumbeat *pianissimo*. A piccolo enters with the tune followed by the choir, the volume increasing with each repetition of the tune, which are interspersed with trumpet fanfares, until the movement ends *fff*.

The multicultural intent of the piece is demonstrated immediately by the second movement which is the Muslim call to prayer. The call to prayer, the *Adhaan*, is sung in Arabic by a muezzin from the minaret of a mosque five times each day. It is

preceded by the declarations: "God is great; I bear witness that there is no other god but Allah; I bear witness that Mohammed is the messenger of Allah."

This is followed by one of the central parts of the Christian mass, the Kyrie, in which the supplicant asks God to grant mercy. A dark and ominous introduction leads into the Kyrie for soprano solo and chorus whose melodic shape has a distinctly 18<sup>th</sup> century feel to it, but the chorus-only *Christe* is specifically described by Jenkins as being written in a style "after Palestrina." The Kyrie then returns, but this time for chorus only.

"Save me from bloody men" sets verses from Psalms 56 and 59 and is another pastiche piece "in the style of Gregorian Chant" for male voices. The psalmist asks God to be merciful and deliver him from his enemies, but the final phrase is interrupted by the sudden thwack of percussion which clearly shows that the supplication has been in vain.

The Sanctus has a distinctly ominous feel, far removed from the exuberant pæan of praise which most composers make of it. Military fanfares on brass and percussion punctuate and undermine the text.

"Hymn before Action" to a text by Kipling is set as a grand choral statement in which the soldiers make grim, fearful preparation for the ultimate sacrifice.

In "Charge" the military fanfares bolster Dryden's text in displaying the bloodlust and visceral appeal that war can have. This alternates with a more flowing section for female voices on the theme of "dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" (How blest is he who for his country dies) a concept which had been used with such searing irony by Wilfred Owen. The final section's repeated cries of "Charge" end with a crescendo of wailing terror (the composer asks the performers to "convey horror!") which suddenly breaks off. After a long, horrified silence the distant trumpet intones the Last Post.

A tolling bell and two trumpets begin "Angry flames", a poem by Japanese poet Toge Sankichi who was 24 when the bomb fell on his home town of Hiroshima. The brief, simple setting is the centrepiece of the work.

We encounter more of the horrors of war in "Torches." This sets lines from the sacred Hindu epic, the Mahabharata. The central story of this text, which dates from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, concerns the battle between two families descended from gods and demons. The fragment chosen by Jenkins and Wilson is as immediate and horrifying as an eyewitness account in a newspaper, and the simplicity of the setting is starkly appropriate.

After such horrors, the *Agnus Dei* is a plea for mercy. Its simple, gentle melodiousness has made this the most popular movement in the work.

The plea in the *Agnus Dei* has been successful and is followed by "Now the guns have stopped", a poem by Jenkins' collaborator Guy Wilson, the Master of the Royal Armouries who commissioned the work. It concerns the "survivor's guilt" often felt by those who have seen friends and family killed, cannot reconcile their survival with this and do not know how to move forward. The elegiac feel of Jenkins' setting movingly conveys the sense of isolation. The succeeding *Benedictus* hints at a way forward. As in *Sancta Civitas*, a sense of religious transcendence can lead to the gradual assuaging of the pain.

The final movement, "Better is peace", begins with the percussion motive and the "L'homme armé" tune which began the work, but now with a subtle musical change which puts the opening phrase into the major and with a pacifist text based on a fragment from the medieval poem "Morte d'Arthur" by Malory. This states the opposite of the original text, though this and the original text then alternate. The central text is from Tennyson's "In Memoriam" where the New Year bells ring out in a message to banish war and replace it with a thousand years of peace. The final section is a setting of "God shall wipe away all tears" from Revelation xxi. The setting is reminiscent of a Victorian hymn (perhaps a tribute to the Welsh choral tradition of Jenkins' youth). Now the brass and percussion are silent, and the choir ends the work with the unaccompanied simplicity of a communal act of worship.

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